

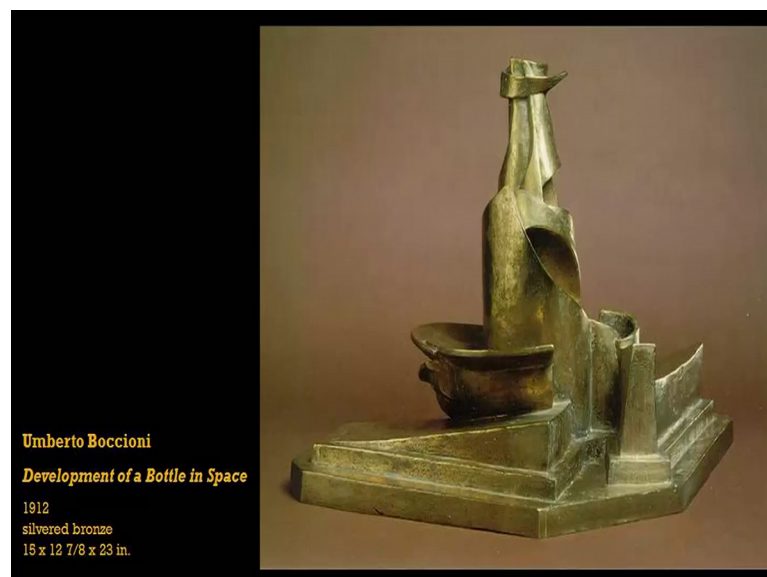
Introducing Modern Western Art : Movements and Artists
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Lecture - 12
From Figuration to Abstract (Henry Moore & Brancusi)

Welcome viewers to MOOCs online course on Introduction to Modern Western Art. Today we will be looking at the evolution of modern western sculpture from figuration to abstraction. As you all might have noticed that more or less a lot of artists in the history of modern western art have been trying to reach or at least explore the possibility of abstraction in their art be it in painting or sculpture. In sculpture this happened rather rapidly than the paintings because in paintings you should notice that in spite of an interest in abstraction not many artists actually were interested in doing a kind of a complete abstract art, more or less they remained in touch with the figurative and a semi representational idiom.

But in the realm of modern western sculpture not only we see that there is a gradual progress towards abstraction, but we also come across which we will be discussing in this lecture and the following lecture, some sculptors who were actually producing a completely non figurative non representational and totally abstract forms in their sculptures. Today in this lecture we will be briefly looking at two very significant sculptors from this early phase of modern western sculpture Henry Moore and Brancusi.

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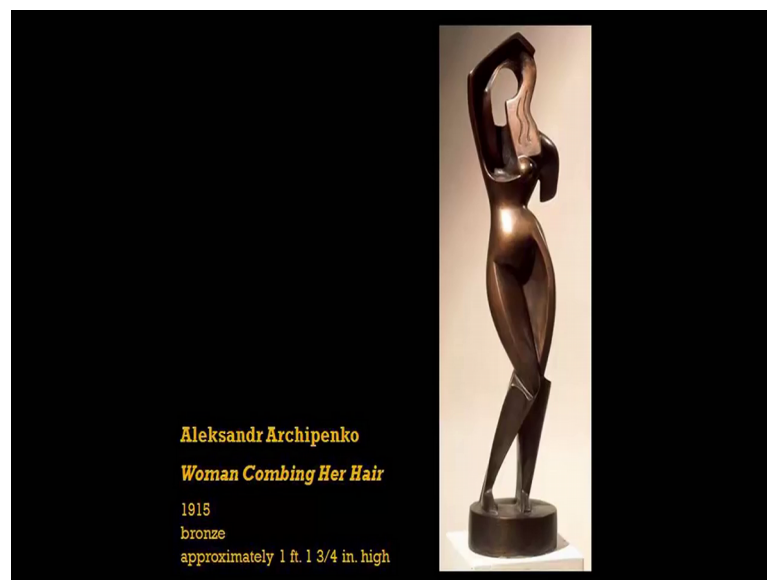


Now, before we talk about Henry Moore and Brancusi let us also remind ourselves of that already under this futurist movement artists like Umberto Boccioni in 1912 was trying to explore this possibilities of abstraction in their works.

They have done that to some extent in their paintings and they are doing that also in the sculpture for example, in this work though the work has a representative title like the development of a bottle in space, but when you look at the title which comes up almost as a full sentence. It suggests that it is not this sculpture is not about the form of a bottle it is actually about the development of bottle in a space considering that the space is very dynamic considering that the space is extremely moving and unstable then in that context what happens to the bottle does the bottle to live in very static or stable or it also tends to change if not really physically, but at least conceptually and mentally.

So, Boccioni was trying to address these issues which were rather conceptual than visual, but the visual result in the sculptures was moving gradually towards the certain kind of abstraction.

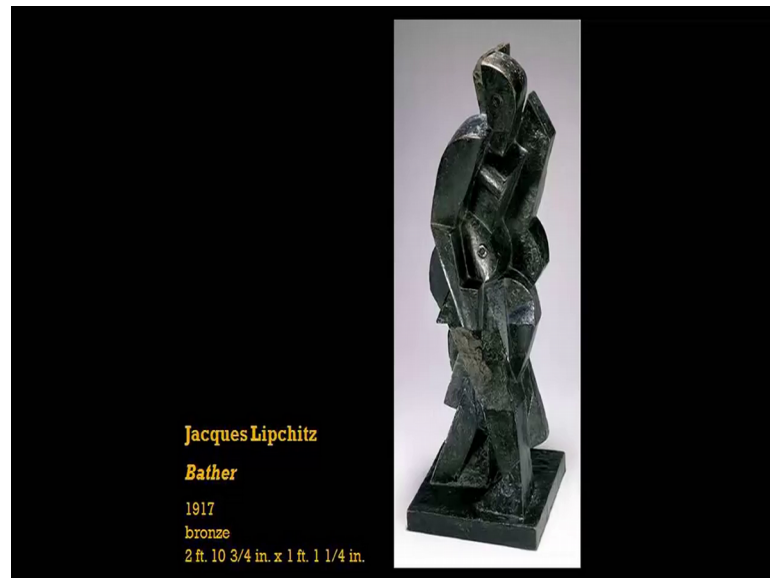
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Same happened with Aleksandr Archipenko in his sculpture done in 1915 where the title is pretty descriptive because it says woman combing her hair, but then when you look at the sculpture it is again not a realistic representation of a woman combing her hair it is a rather abstract figurative idea of the same subject and then how does he go about it.

He takes help of the liberty that has already been shown by the previous artists like the cubists or futurists or even fauvists in the realm of painting. So, Archipenko was trying to explore these possibilities of not straight away going for a realistic representation, but exploring the abstract possibilities inherent in the idea of a sculpture, and this is one of his results.

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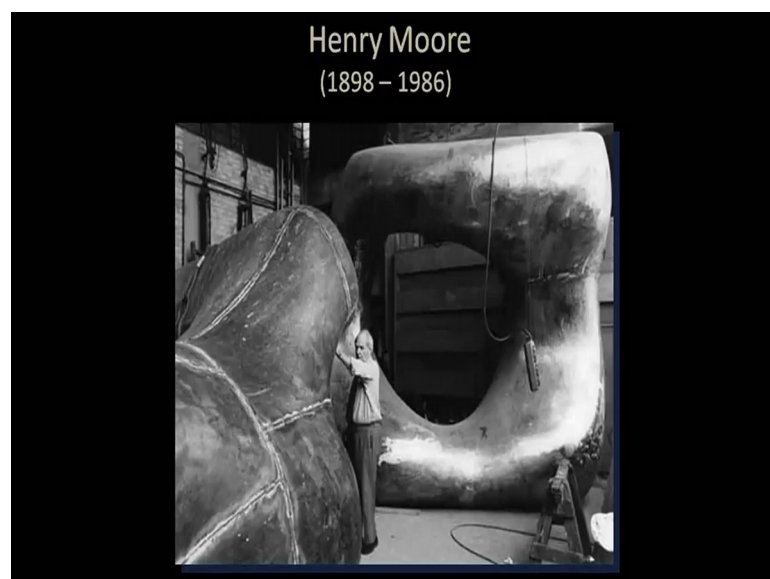
Similarly Jacques Lipchitz in 1917 creates a sculpture called the bather where anybody who is bathing is not really visible anymore from the sculpture probably the idea bather was simply a pretext an opportunity for the sculptor to explore the a new arrangement a new kind of arrangement of forms or fragments of a form derived from the idea of a person who was breathing.

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Now, in 1953 we find much later Henry Moore was also addressing or exploring certain ideas sculptural ideas were representation to a limited extent will be there of course, but it leaves a room a lot of room for the abstraction to creeping for the abstraction to kind of a birds in a way that this sculptures ultimately lose the figurative references to a great extent and the sculptures you may say they kind of a find their life not in the references or realistic references, but in the abstraction.

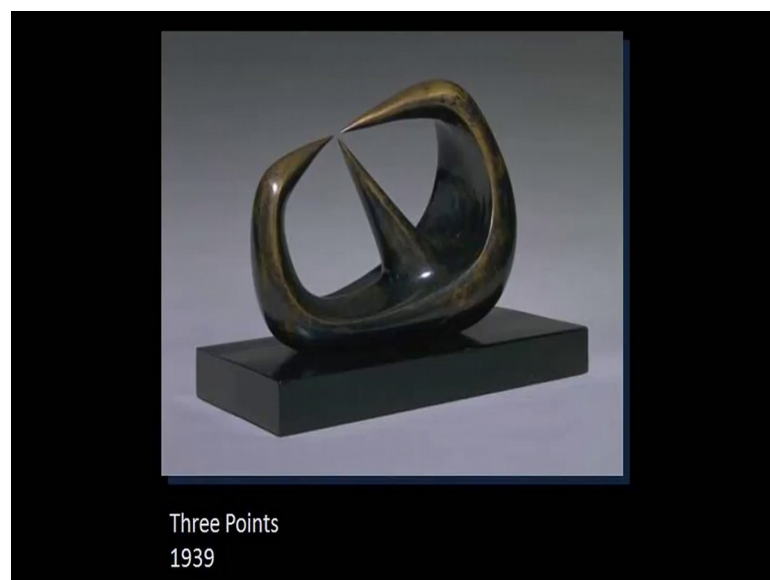
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So, in other words in the hands of sculptors like Henry Moore, Brancusi and others and later on we shall see the works done by the constructivists and minimalists who to an extreme extent were kind of trying to get rid of the realistic references as much as possible and bring in the power of abstraction.

So, from Henry Moore onwards we see that consistently apart from a few sculptors most of the sculptors were trying to explore this power of abstraction. That abstraction is not simply running away from the reality it is not really about escaping the reality, but it is about embracing a different language of expression where forms, geometry, rhythm, abstract arbitrary volumes can be dealt in a way that they in relationship with each other will give birth to a new sculptural idea.

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And along with that what Henry Moore does in many of his sculptures is he magnifies the scale he also deals with the size he makes monumental sculpture.

Now, in 1939 Henry Moore does the sculpture called Three Points where you do not find any reference to any figurative experience there is no suggestion of figure there is no suggestion of realistic space. It is about as the title literally suggests about three sharp points meet in each other. First of all as a visual form the sculpture looks pretty interesting no doubt, but again it might be little difficult for those viewers who are desperate to find either a narrative meaning or a very clear cut kind of concept or a story from the sculpture. No this kind of sculpture does not have either a story or an active

content this kind of sculptures do not even have how to say a very ideal idea or a ideal concept behind them.

It is basically the ideas as you see in the modern sculpture by Henry Moore Brancusi and others. The ideas also derived from the sculpture itself. In the traditional sense or going by the traditional logic idea is supposed to emerge from either your life experience or from your history or from your past or from ancient mythology religion so on and so forth. But in modern art and particularly modern sculpture we see ideas are emerging from the idea itself or you can say ideas emerging from the sculpture itself. So, one sculpture is generating the idea for the next sculpture. The sculpt it is not necessary for the sculptor to look at the world that the visual world outside in order to derive ideas.

Visual world has always remained a very resourceful kind of area to source your ideas to have your ideas, but the visual world itself is not a direct supplier of your ideas.

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In modern sculpture at least you can see that the language of the sculpture is potentially a very important tool a kind of strength and energy which is providing you with lot of ideas. For example, when you look at this sculpture by Henry Moore though you may try hard to figured out that probably this image is having a reference to a figure and all that even if there is a reference that reference is so remote so big, so removed from the form that you almost at the end give up to think about the reference and you get more interested to enjoy the forms and more importantly the relationship between the forms

because Henry Moore again is the first modern sculpture to have conceived sculpture in components in parts.

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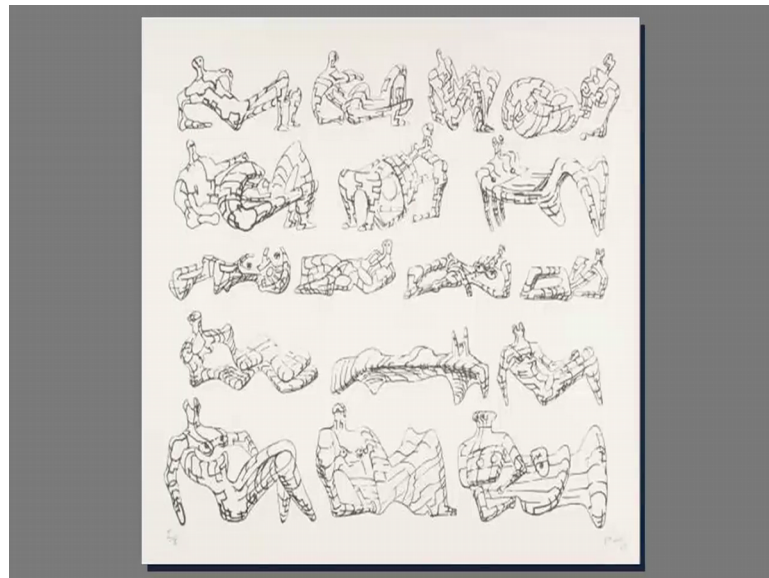
Because you if you follow the traditional norms of sculpture, a sculpture should have one single physical entity, but Henry Moore you will see many sculptures by him where he is using a number of parts smaller parts bigger parts and arranging them in a way on a single pedestal to form or give the idea of one single sculpture.

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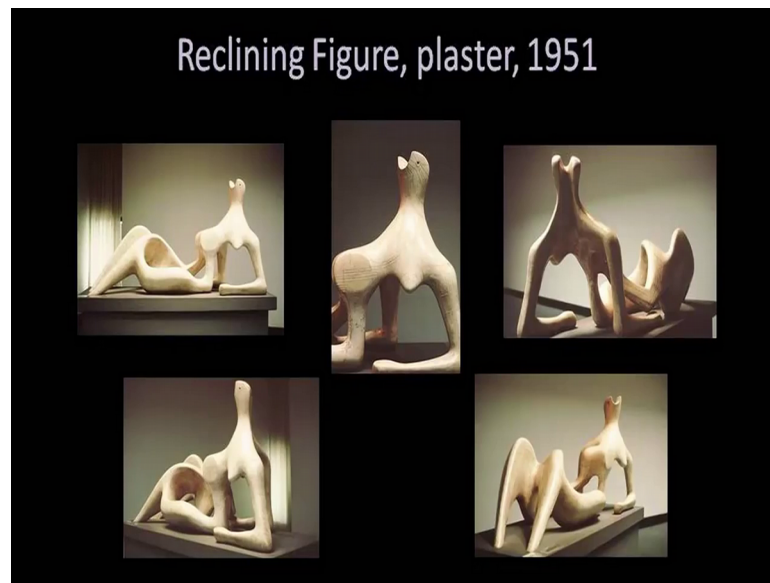
This again is a wonderful contribution to the history of modern sculpture to be able to conceive a sculpture not as one single entity, but as a composition. As a kind of a arrangement of various smaller oceans components or parts which all together constitute or give meaning to the entire sculptural experience.

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In fact, in his drawings also Henry Moore was exploring this idea of the idea, of looking at a figure or an object in terms of components, but not like the cubists. Cubists would really love to rearrange the components in terms of multiple viewpoints, this is not something that Henry Moore was doing.

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Moore was more interested in reducing a whole form into smaller parts and ultimately then rearranging the smaller parts into a complete experience. One of a very favorite I would say one of the very favorite topics or themes which Henry Moore was exploring again and again repetitively this idea of a reclining figure it could be a reclining woman or a reclining warrior or a reclining figure and like Rodin Henry Moore takes one step further to make his figures completely anonymous or completely devoid of any identity.

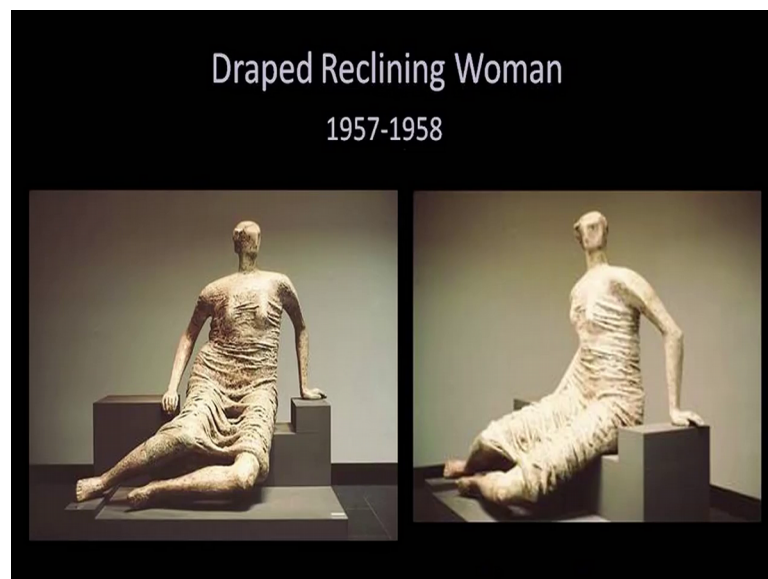
In fact, the whole question of the identity of a figure is irrelevant in the context of Henry Moore's works and this anonymity of figures unless you are directly doing a portrait of somebody this anonymity of figures will become the hallmark of modern sculpture throughout. Not only in the words of Henry Moore and Brancusi, but also in the words of Giacometti also in the works of the latest sculptures where the identity of any single person any single figure is not the issue at all.

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So, what is the concern then? The concern is the form is the rhythm of the body of the various possibilities in which you can reshape a body, reconfigure a body, reform a body, rearrange different parts of the body and by doing that if you look at this Henry Moore a sculptors like him can also arrive at forms which ultimately or eventually loses all kinds of references and become completely abstract.

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But at the same time he was also extremely skillful in dealing with semi naturalistic forms like this where he can even show a kind of a diaphanous, a drapery on the body of

a figure. But though the drapery and the way the ripper is clinging onto the body is pretty naturalistic if you look at the heads of these figures once again the heads are completely devoid of any specific identity.

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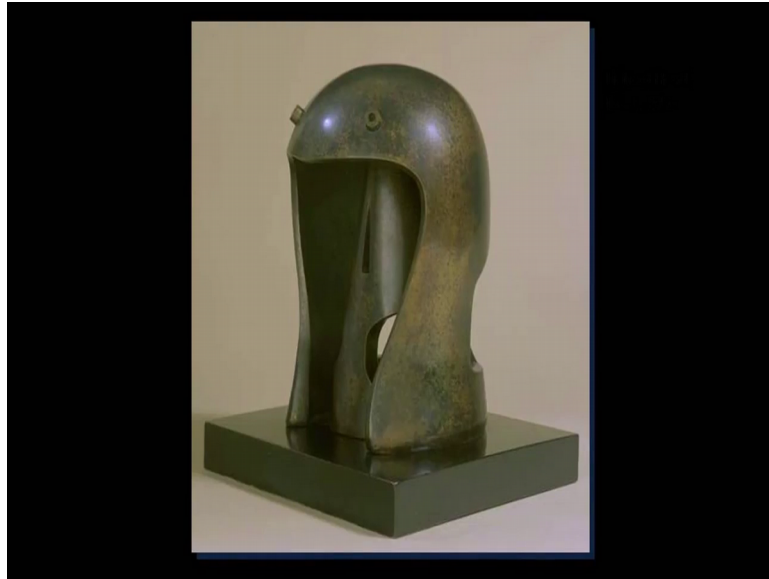


So, from specific identity that was a kind of a norm in the traditional sculpture Henry Moore made almost all his sculptures figural sculptures non specific in the identity. So, the stylized shape suggest a figure rather than literally representing one figure carved from wood the knots and wood grain determined its final shape. So, he is giving lot of chance a lot of a kind of, is allowing the material to speak. He is not converting the material into the form. The material itself is participating in shaping the form.

So, this is again a very unique kind of feature that is going to be a consistent and a or a very regular kind of concern for many modern sculptors that is the role of the medium. Medium for the modern sculptors is no more a tool, medium itself is considered to be a very vibrant organic and an eloquent component of a work of art. So, let the medium speak, let the medium also determine and dictate the form of the body as much as the form dictates the medium. So, if you notice the open space as far as the bottom sculpture is concerned the open space cut through the torso of the body. This is completely unrealistic, but it creates a sense of rhythm, it creates a different relationship between the parts of the body and this opening gives interest to the carving because you can also almost enjoy the carving.

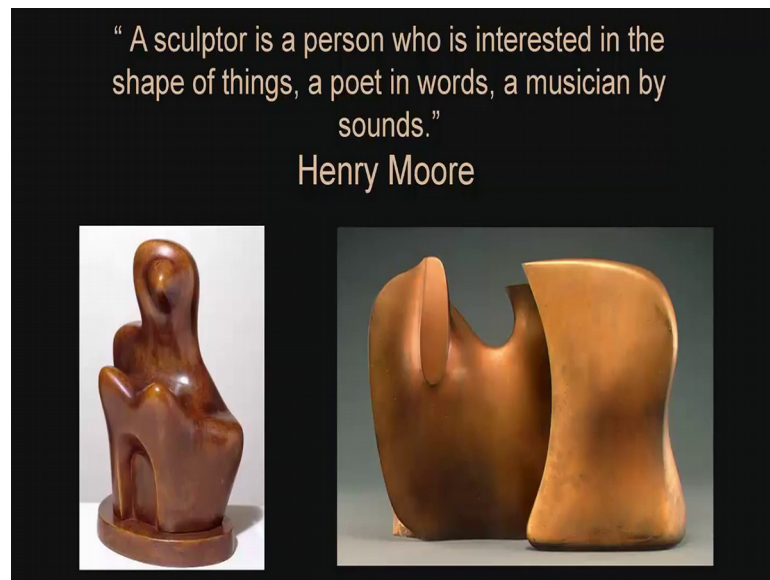
This is again a very important contribution of the modern sculptors master sculptors like Henry Moore that when a viewer is looking at his sculptures he or she is not simply looking at the figures and the movements of the figures or the postures or the extraction. The viewer is also supposed to enjoy the carving the carving process that particular figure has undergone.

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So, is not it very interesting that you are making your sculpture in a way that enables the viewer to enjoy not just the final product, but also at least partly the process the technical process that this particular form has undergone to reach the final stage.

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Now, according to Henry Moore a sculptor is a person who is interested in the shape of things like a poet in words or a musician by sounds. So, in this statement Henry Moore makes it very very clear, what was a central concern throughout his career as a sculptor.

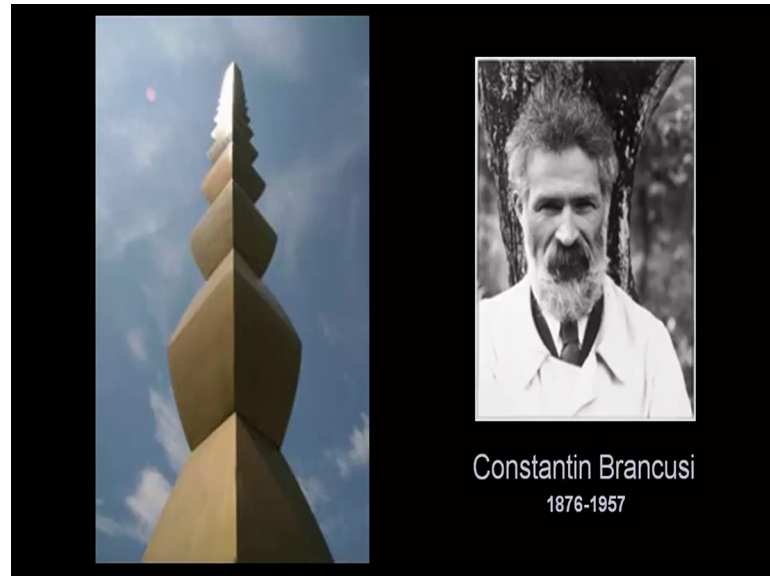
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And as it is evident from many of his sculptures that abstraction for Henry Moore was not necessarily an elimination of reality, for Henry Moore abstraction was a way to reach the essence of the form or the essence of the reality and in doing. So, if you are bound to get rid of certain realistic references let it be, what you are happy with is the

essential idea of a form and its possibilities partly determined by your technical procedure your material, and the medium.

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Our next sculptor in this lecture is constant in Brancusi he worked in the later part of 19th century as well as the entire first two quarters of 20th century.

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Now, even a brief look at his studio and when you look at some of these pieces of art lying in his studio, you can make out this artist is also very much interested in abstraction

though like Henry Moore he also had a lot of realistic references in his mind it was part of his concern.

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Historical Context

- Middle of “Modern Art” period from roughly 1880s to 1960s-70s
- Post-Impressionist, leading towards more abstract art
- Contemporaries include: August Rodin, Antonin Mercié
- Student of Rodin, he rejected Rodin’s realism for abstract functionalism, but paralleled Rodin’s independence



The Thinker

But the central focus was not on realistic representation rather on the abstract essence of forms interestingly Brancusi was a student of August Rodin we despite the fact that he was a student of Rodin he rejected Rodin’s realism for abstract functionalism, but he almost parallel Rodin’s independence because Rodin to a certain extent he asserted his independence in his forms as a sculptor.

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Similarly, Brancusi also asserted his independence in his sculptures and as a sculptor in the way he conceived the forms in the way he executed the forms. For example in this two sculptures titled as the kiss and the bird in space the titles are referential very clear there is no abstraction in the title, but the way he visualized the form is definitely based strongly on the idea of abstraction as it is very clear. Because what he emphasizes in the sculpture titled kiss is not really the act of the kiss on that particular physical intimacy more than that Brancusi is interested in emphasizing the form almost blocked like geometrically shaped forms how to though it is one single piece, but it appears like this two separate pieces of sculptures of blocks of stones coming very close together.

So, he is making a statement in the language of sculpture as much as he is addressing a very intense and an intimate moment of human relationship. Similarly when you look at this sculpture very famous sculpture called the bird in space here you neither see the bird not the space what to see is a sense of lights once again if you go by what Brancusi had tried to achieve throughout his life.

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This is very very evident from this sculpture and later sculptures also that he was despite the references of the visual reality he was not interested in the representation of visual reality he was interested in capturing the essence of the form and in order to capture the essence of the form like Henry Moore to some extent Brancusi was also following a reductionist method.

This is what it is called technically speaking that you get rid of anything that you feel extraneous excess anything that you think is not needed to emphasize the essential aspect of a form. So, you begin to reduce, you begin to erase, you begin to delete a lot of features either from the face or from the figure of a many object and following this reductionist method Brancusi also arrives at his own kind of abstraction. Whereas, Henry Moore's abstraction was more associated with the organic possibilities of rhythm, structure, form and components of body and Brancusi's abstraction was more connected to a reductionist method where you not only reduce the form into something. So, simple that now it is able to capture the essence of the form.

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But you also reduce the form in the sense of simplifying the form. So, reductionist method along with a certain simplification is the main at the central kind of line of procedure technical procedure as well as conceptual process followed by Brancusi. Even when you look at this work which is supposed to evoke silence the table of silence there even the measurement between each units between the units, between the central circular object and the smaller objects around he supposed to evoke silence tranquility and peace and all this things are completely intangible.

But to capture then them I mean these issues these ideas of tranquility peace harmony, calmness, quietness, quiet attune to capture this elements in tangible forms that to in sculpture is definitely a very difficult a very challenging task.

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The Flying Turtle

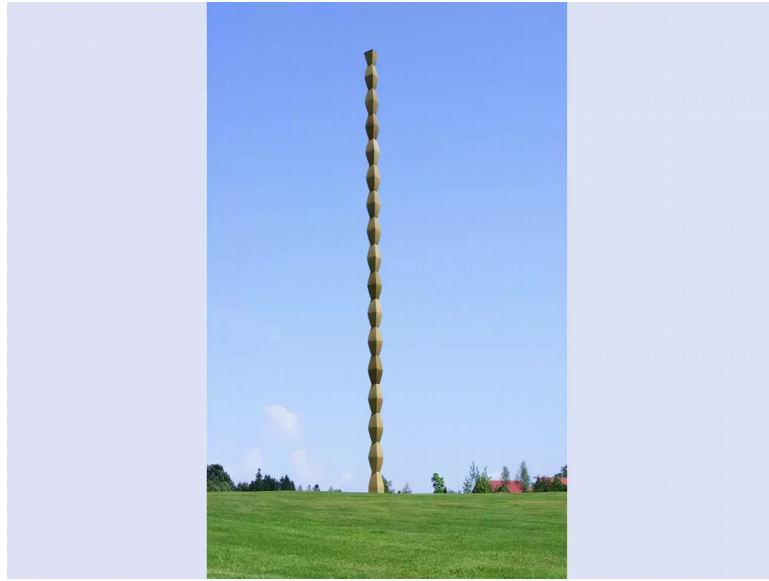
- One of several animal sculptures
- Echoes modernists of various mediums doing animal themes
- Highly simplistic, captures simple geometry of complex shape



So, what Brancusi does is he plays with the essential simplification of the forms, he also explores the possibility of having or exploiting the distance between the various parts of the form. In other words Brancusi was an incredible sculptor who was the first sculptor in the history of art who was able to evoke silence not only evoke silence he was able to actually measure and execute silence in his works and he did that by simplifying because he realized that as a sculptor that more details you have on your sculpture the sculpture gets more noisy. In order to make the sculpture silent you need to simplify and get rid of the extraneous and unnecessary details.

So, the simplification was not really for Brancusi at least it was not just to get rid of the realistic references for him it was it enabled him to capture to address and to execute to actually materialize the essence of certain other ideas like harmony peace and tranquility.

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In that sense though Brancusi's works look very simple and not very simple it is actually very complex because a lot of geometry a lot of measurement a lot of calculation is also involved in his works like his famous work called the endless column.

Now, the endless column like any physical object of course, has a certain length or height, but what Brancusi intended to evoke was an endlessness of the column. So, though the physically the column stops at a certain height conceptually emotionally or psychologically it is supposed to go on. It is supposed to not have any termination anywhere it is supposed to be an endless kind of feeling. Now just by doing or erecting a very long columnar structure is not enough one had to and this is what Brancusi did very successfully he actually kind of he measured he actually measured each and every component of that entire column with some varying degrees of length height and weight.

So, that visually and psychologically it creates a fantastic impression on our perception that what we are looking at is not something that has stopped at a certain height, but structure, a sculpture that is going on and on until it reaches the heaven.

Thank you.